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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### ANOTHER WORD ON "THE ETHICS OF MIRACLES."

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IN the June NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, the Rev. Dr. S. D. McConnell attempts to show that Biblical miracles are often out of keeping with advanced ethical conceptions. He gives point to his criticism by specifying certain of those miracles and suggesting how they violate what is ethical. He begins by making use of the miracle which the Book of Acts contains, in reference to a certain deliverance from prison experienced by Peter. He considers this account deficient in proper ethical insight, owing to the fact that in connection with it the statement is found, which informs us that when Herod heard of Peter's escape he gave orders for the execution of the prison guards. In thus criticizing this account he has overlooked the fact that if such an indirect result can properly be charged against the miracle, making it out of harmony with the proper conception of God, there are also a great many facts in connection with the conception of the formation and development of the earth and the universe, which he evidently holds, which are not in accord with the highest ethics. As witness of this take the struggle for existence resulting in the survival of the fittest as set before us in evolutionary philosophy. Tennyson described it as "red in tooth and claw," and his sensitive soul was shocked beyond the power of his genius to tell, all of which is plainly indicated in his "In Memoriam." And we may say that a wave of agony rolled round the world through the hearts of multitudes as this idea of the development of life made its way into human thinking. That exceedingly humane scientist, Henry Drummond, did his best to show that the final results would be ample justification of all the immense and varied suffering of the process. Alfred Russell Wallace tried to mitigate it somewhat by advancing the idea, "There is good reason to believe that the supposed torments and miseries of animals have little real existence, but are the reflection of the imagined sensations of cultivated men and women in similar circumstances." But the suffering of the human part of the struggle cannot be thus mitigated. Mr. Huxley, according to Henry Drummond, as he faced "the tremendous problem gave it up and said: 'There is no solution; nature is without excuse.'" Dr. McConnell has committed himself to this evolutionary conception, and having done so, is it not an amazingly inconsistent thing for him to turn around and criticize a miracle, because as an indirect result of it a king ordered the execution of a number of soldiers? If he knows of any more such instances he might put them all together, and having done so, he would not then have a

millionth part of the misery which his evolutionary-working God has ordered in nature for every day of untold millions of ages. To say that God does this in an immanent manner meets no more correctly the protests of our ethical instincts than one may be excused for killing another in an immanent manner, say, by having a sufficient number of mosquitoes, heavily laden with death-generating germs, sting him. Most anybody would have more regard for a person, at least for his courage, who would attack him with a club or a gun, than in any such supposed treacherous manner. And we venture to guess that if any one of us had to face choosing between being executed as those soldiers were, or being subjected to the kind of life which science informs us many of our ancestors had to endure, he would choose the former "mighty quick," notwithstanding the fact that the latter might be in perfect harmony with his view of ethics. The essential fact to keep in mind is just this, however God is conceived of as acting, whether immanently or otherwise, we should in every case apply to the conception the same ethical standard. If we do that in this case the criticism in question will appear infinitely puerile.

The second miracle mentioned by Dr. McConnell is criticized for what he calls its lack of appreciation of "the reign of law," binding the whole universe in one vast system. It is that one which pictures the "standing still" of the sun and moon. The writer of this reply is inclined to the opinion that we have in that a magnificent piece of metaphor, which was no more intended to be understood literally than Christ wished us to interpret thus His parable of the Prodigal Son. But suppose that it was intended to be understood literally; even then the criticism which Dr. McConnell has made may easily be shown to be untenable. While he was insisting on the idea of the universality of the reign of law, why should he have failed to take account of the universality of the being of God as expressed in the Old Testament? The miracle is set before us as something which was wrought, not by a local deity, nor by a god simply of the earth, but by God the infinite; by God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth; by God who stretches out the heavens as a curtain and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in; by God omnipresent and almighty, as described so wonderfully in the 139th Psalm and in the Book of Job. Here we may, perhaps, refer with profit to a passage written several centuries ago by a theologian whom, very likely, Dr. McConnell does not often refer to, John Calvin. Writing of God's support and preservation of the world and the universe, he said: "To represent God as the Creator only for a moment, who entirely finished all His work at once, were dense and jejune; and in this it behooves us to differ from the heathen so that the presence of the Divine power may appear to us no less in the perpetual state of the world than in its origin. . . . When faith has learned that God is the Creator of all things, it should immediately conclude that He is also their perpetual governor and preserver; and that not by a certain universal motion, actuating the whole machine of the world and all of its respective parts, but by a particular providence sustaining, nourishing, and providing for everything which He has made." When one has such a conception of the relation of God to the universe, or one similar to it, he understands that God, if He wished for some sufficient

purpose to restrain somewhat the motion of any part of the universe, could at the same time effect the necessary adjustments throughout the whole universe, even more easily than an engineer applies the brakes and regulates his train-speed to suit his will. This idea of Böotes having to be wrecked in case of any such event is therefore absurd to a mind that keeps in view the reign of almighty power and intelligence. The only way that such a criticism could be justified would be through first showing that the Old Testament does not hold a sufficient idea of the infinity of God.

Returning from this famous miracle of the Book of Joshua to the New Testament, our critic attacks miracles *in toto* as being expressive of partiality on the part of God in His dealings with mankind. Two objections may be made to this criticism. One is that the object in view of the miracles was not primarily the benefit of the individuals who were assisted by them, but the giving of part of the evidence concerning the person and mission of Jesus, so that every miracle is, according to the idea of the New Testament, related to the whole world. It may be illustrated in this way. Nowadays there are expert machinists who travel, demonstrating for their companies. I have known a score of farmers to go miles to see such an expert demonstrate a machine. The farmer on whose place the demonstration occurs may receive a particular benefit which I need not stop to specify, but the demonstration is given for all the farmers of the community. It is the same with the miracles of the Bible; the whole world, according to the conception of the Bible itself, is in different ways related to them. The other objection in point is this: if there is any just ground for such a criticism of the Christian miracles, there is also an equally good ground for criticizing what is taught in the Bible in reference to many other matters. We read that Jesus confined Himself almost exclusively to Palestine, that only in one or two instances did He have anything to do with people of other nations. Why may we not criticize him for this? Why may we not suggest that if He had taken a boat and gone over to Greece and discoursed on Mars Hill He might, far more easily, have got a hearing there than did the Apostle Paul preaching of His Resurrection? Or we may ask, why, instead of preaching in a particular place, one Sermon on the Mount to a few thousand people, did Jesus not do so in many different parts of the country, and give far more people a chance to hear the blessed words fall from His own lips? To Dr. McConnell the miracle is an offense, while Christ's teaching and spirit are everything; but as we have already seen, He did not distribute either His preaching or His companionship as widely as some people might think He should have done. He was apparently more partial with His words than with His reputed miracles, for it is distinctly written that while the multitudes often misunderstood His words, and His apostles also, that He never took the trouble to explain His words to the people, but only to His "inner circle." And instead of being particular to arrange things so that He could be entertained in as many homes of those who believed in Him as possible, it appears that a few homes, notably one at Bethany, had that privilege and blessing. If we begin such a variety of criticism, where can we legitimately stop?

It often happens that one child of a family is possessed of natural

abilities and charms of character far in excess of all the others; it often happens that a community is blessed only once in centuries with some select and splendid soul. Why should not all the other people born in such a family, or such a community, criticize Providence, working through the natural world, for His apparent partiality? The same question might also be asked in reference to whole nations.

Why, for example, did Providence permit a nation like Rome to dominate the world instead of interfusing enough of intelligence and vigor generally, so that all the nations might have advanced hand in hand, no one being the slave of any other? Are these not just as legitimate questions as are those which Dr. McConnell has asked? Here it will be in place to repeat a statement which has already been made in this article, namely, the essential fact to keep in mind is just this, however God is conceived of as acting, whether immanently or otherwise, we should in every case apply to the conception the same ethical standard.

In connection with this criticism of the reputed miracles of Christ, the surprising assertion is made that Christ "belittles the belief that came from seeing many mighty works." The sources from which we may get our ideas of this are, either the words of Jesus as reported in the New Testament, or our own or other men's ideas formed, in large part, independently of the text. I prefer to form mine on the basis of what is given in the text. Here are some passages bearing on the subject: "And the disciples of John told him of all these things. And John calling two of his disciples sent them to the Lord, saying art thou he that cometh, or do we look for another? And when the men were come unto him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us unto thee, saying, art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?' . . . And He answered and said unto them, 'Go your way and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good tidings preached unto them.'" And in His reported lament over certain cities He is represented as having said: "Woe unto thee Chorazin! woe unto thee Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which were done in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." And when He sent forth the Seventy He did not instruct them simply to preach and to teach, but to work miracles; and it is further reported that they returned rejoicing, for one reason, because the "very demons were subject to them."

It is true that Jesus refused to give "signs" to the rulers, but that was because He was too wise to exert Himself to gratify mere curiosity, or to produce a spectacle when those who desired it were positively opposed to Him. He replied to faith and suffering, not to any such requests as the rulers made of him. We can see that in this He acted intelligently. We may also observe that on a few occasions He told those whom He had healed not to report it publicly. Whatever His reasons were for giving such commands, in the face of all the testimony which there is showing that He put high value on His miracles, they do not justify any such an idea as that He did so from any such a motive as this one suggested by Dr. McConnell.

But the most amazing item of this criticism is the approval which it gives to the protest of Zola against the credibility of the record concern-

ing the resurrection of Lazarus. The idea of the whole of this passage from Zola is given in its first sentence, namely: "Master! Master! why have you awakened me to this abominable life?" Lazarus is thus represented as being selfish enough, even in the presence of Jesus, to object to being of service to the world, and also as caring nothing for the grief of his two devoted sisters. Such a spirit is, of course, entirely out of accord with the spirit of Christianity. In a great passage of one of the epistles of the New Testament it is written that angels are often in specific ways "sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation." We may also recall the famous passage from Milton, concluding with the lines:

"Who best  
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state  
Is kingly; thousands at His bidding speed,  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

But here we have one who is contending, so he says, for the loftiest ethical conceptions, giving his approval to what would have been an expression of contemptible selfishness on the part of Lazarus.

J. WALLACE MACGOWAN.

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HASTINGS HOUSE, NORFOLK STREET, STRAND, W. C.

June 21, 1913.

Sir:

My attention has only now been drawn to a review of *Hadji Murad* and *The Light That Shines in Darkness*, published, as long ago as June, 1912, in your influential and widely read magazine. I hope that, even at this late date, you will do me the courtesy of allowing me to point out a couple of mistakes, which do me serious injustice.

In the first place, the reviewer holds me responsible for the translation of *The Light That Shines*, whereas I do not even know who made the version in question.

Secondly, your reviewer holds me guilty of retaining in the text of the Tartar story, *Hadji Murad*, a number of Russian words "to annoy the reader." So different is this from my custom that I should be unable to understand the reproach had the reviewer not been kind enough to quote these "Russian" words: *naïb*, *kizyak*, etc.—and thereby made it plain that they are not Russian words at all, but Tartar. Tolstoy retains them in his own text because there are no single Russian (nor are there any single English) words which cover the same ground, and the use of circumlocutions would spoil the crisp, concise style in which the story is written. I hoped that my preface and foot-notes had sufficiently explained this point.

Furthermore, I am somewhat perturbed to learn that I am "neither an understanding commentator nor a good translator." This matter is of some importance to me, and as I do not wish the case to go by default, may I beg to call three witnesses for the defense?

Bernard Shaw writes: "Though I cannot say that Mr. Aylmer Maude is the best Tolstoy translator now living, that is only because I cannot